

# Institutionalized advisory systems: An analysis of member satisfaction of advice production and use across 9 strategic advisory councils in Flanders (Belgium)

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## Abstract

Policy-making in Flanders (Belgium) is traditionally characterized by a dense advisory system with a high number of advisory councils, firmly integrated into the policy-making process. Recently, the Flemish government has reshaped its strategic advisory council system, responding to concerns over growing advice competition. This reorganization was part of a broader reform aimed at increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of policies. In this article, we analyze the defining aspects of this new advisory council system, and explore members' satisfaction about the advisory process and the use of advice by policy-makers. The latter can be considered a prerequisite for advice to contribute to policy-making. Our analysis is based on a 2009 survey with the members of the new strategic advisory councils (response 72.4%). The results show that reorganizing the advisory council system has not led to uniformity regarding council size, budget or membership constitution. And although satisfaction with the advisory process is generally high, the influence of the advice is perceived as low, which poses a challenge to neo-corporatist policy-making in Flanders.

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## 1. Introduction

The Flemish regional government, like the Belgian federal one, traditionally funds a relatively large number of permanent advisory councils of varying constitution. The extensive number of advisory councils is not surprising in a consensus-based political system with neo-corporatist traits, where traditional stakeholder groups possess policy-making powers (Cawson, 1982; Lembruch & Schmitter, 1977). Despite their importance to policy-making processes, very little research has been conducted on policy advisory systems in general, and advisory councils in particular. In Flanders there is no longstanding policy analytical research tradition on this topic as in e.g. The Netherlands (Halffman & Hoppe, 2004) or the U.S. (Lavertu, Walters, & Weiming, 2012; Santos & Chess, 2003). And although advisory councils have been the topic of research in Belgium from a comparative politics perspective (Dewachter, 1995; De Winter, 2009), this has not provided insights into how they are organized, how advice comes to play, and what the influence of advice on public policy might be. This article tries to fill this analytical gap. Its aim is to analyze the Flemish advisory councils' capacities to influence the policy-making process. For this, we look at the councils' most

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important general characteristics after the reform, and at membership satisfaction on the internal advisory process. Additionally, we present the perceptions of the advisory councils' members regarding their influence on policy-making. For this, the article predominantly draws on a survey that was conducted with the members of the strategic advisory council system in Flanders.

The article is structured as follows: first, the context for conducting policy advice is discussed. Second, the Flemish advisory council tradition is elaborated upon. Then, the research approach is dealt with in more detail. We present the main findings of the study, pertaining to the general characteristics of the councils, and the perceptions on the production and influence of policy advice by these advisory bodies. The results show that there are substantial differences between the strategic advisory councils in Flanders, with regard to for example budget or staff size and council legacy. While the councils thus have different capacities for advising governments, members across all councils are positive about the advisory process itself. The influence of advice on policy-making in turn, was perceived as rather limited by the councils' members. In light of these results, some concluding remarks are made.

## 2. The context for advising governments

Research shows increasing attention for evidence-based policy within governments and the implementation of diverse sources within advisory systems through which evidence is provided (Bellone & en Goerl, 1992; Bowen & Zwi, 2005; Davies, Nutley, & Smith, 1999; Lowndes, Pratchett, & Stoker, 2001; Nutley, Davies, & Walter, 2009; OECD, 2001; Pawson, 2002; Shaxson, 2005). These advisory systems aim to counter a reduced policy analytical capacity of governments (Howlett, 2008; Painter & Pierre, 2005) resulting out of the rising complexity or 'wickedness' (Rittel & Webber, 1973) of policy problems.

Peters and Barker argue that advisory systems are implemented for very specific reasons. They note that "receiving advice helps governments to appear more open and democratic", and that "governments may [also] accept or seek out advice simply because they want to make the right decisions" (1993). The appearance of being more open and democratic provides policy-makers with stronger policy support, while making the right decisions implies efficient and effective policies. Linked to this, Brans and Vancoppenolle (2005) distinguish a trend towards professionalization of policy-making on the one hand, and towards interactiveness on the other hand. The former aims to improve policies' efficiency and effectiveness through a better identification and formulation of policy goals and instruments by professional policy analysts. The latter pertains to garnering stronger support for policies via a closer involvement in the policy process of citizens or stakeholders.

The motives for the implementation and institutionalization of advisory systems are thus part of a rationalist and instrumentalist approach to policy-making and even democracy (Mayer, Edelenbos, & Monnikhof, 2005). The aforementioned dual trend to strengthen policy analytical capacities of governments can however also lead to tensions in the policy-making process: While professionalization calls upon the role of objective policy analysis and advice in the policy process, interactiveness bestows an important position on the opinion of citizens and stakeholders, leading to more value-based advice (Brans & Vancoppenolle, 2005).

Next to the need to strengthen policy analytical capacity, other possible motives for the implementation of advisory systems also exist. Suffice it to refer to substantive democratic arrangements for empowerment of civil society actors, or in a less noble fashion, to strategic and symbolic participation. In the case of strategic motives, the role of advisory systems in policy-making gives governments at least the appearance of being welcoming towards and responsive to knowledge and insights provided by various actors (Peters & Barker, 1993). Governments may thus seek policy advice to legitimize policy-decisions which have already been decided upon (Boswell, 2009; Sabatier, 1978; Weiss, 1986).

As Halligan points out, policy advice has become "more contested and competitive" (1995, p. 138) with institutionalized advisory councils existing next to other sources of advice, such as political advisors, think-tanks, interest groups, research institutes, temporary advisory bodies, and private sector or non-governmental organizations. Apart from identifying the motives behind the designing of advisory systems at one point of time, it is also important to understand the historical embedding of these institutions. Advisory systems often remain part of the policy-making process because they have been for a long time and are not easily abolished. Institutionalized advisory bodies have for long played an important role in consensus-based political systems with neo-corporatist traits (Lembruch & Schmitter, 1977). Policy-making in policy domains such as education, welfare or health, and socio-economic policies is traditionally dominated by few key stakeholders (Schmitter, 1984; Scholten, 1987; Van Waarden & Lembruch, 2004). In neo-corporatist policy systems, stakeholders are not only consulted through formal and institutionalized

advisory bodies, they can also make bipartite or tripartite decisions in their respective policy domains (Ebbinghaus, 2006). The advisory system therefore tends to be highly integrated into the official policy-making cycle (Bulmer, 1993), and key stakeholders are endowed with formal policy formulation and decision-making powers.

Of course, the involvement of stakeholders in public policy-making varies to different degrees and across different policy domains in systems with neo-corporatist traits. In certain domains, the power of traditional stakeholders is played out in both formal and informal consultations at one or more instances of the policy cycle (OECD, 2001) via permanent or ad hoc advisory bodies. This type of advice then, is not necessarily binding for policy-makers, although we would argue that it might nonetheless possess great authority.

Advisory councils in particular can provide different types of knowledge and insights for the policy-making process, varying from objective research results to experience-based knowledge to subjective ideas and opinions (Head, 2010). Advisory bodies may be constituted entirely of scientists (Jasanoff, 1994) or of individual citizens (Koontz, 2005), although especially in systems with neo-corporatist traits they predominantly tend to involve representatives of stakeholder groups (Halffman & Hoppe, 2004).

In light of this, we also need to qualify the distinction we made earlier between the use of objective, scientific analysis in light of better policies (professionalization), and the inclusion of subjective opinions and interests by stakeholders leading to broader societal support (interactiveness) (Brans & Vancoppenolle, 2005). Pielke (2010) refers to the fact that scientists not only provide objective analysis as ‘science arbiter’ in the policy process, thereby improving the quality of policy-decisions. They can also play a more ‘political’ role and can be mobilized as ‘issue advocates’ in situations where policy problems are highly uncertain on a scientific level and strongly contested on the societal level (Pielke, 2010; Rice, 2011). Moreover, citizens, stakeholders and/or interest group representatives may provide policymakers with important insights, based on their own experience (Street, 1993; Topf, 1993). Given that “he who does, knows” (Bulmer, 1993, p. 37), the longstanding and often close involvement of (key) stakeholders in the implementation of policy-decisions in systems with neo-corporatist traits indeed implies that these actors possess valuable evidence in their policy domains. Experience-based advice then is not based on scientific analysis, but it can equally help policy-makers to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of policy-decisions based on technical considerations.

Accordingly, the formulation of better policies does not seem exclusively dependent upon the inclusion of one type of actor or the other. A more decisive factor for advice to contribute substantively to policy is its influence on the policy-making process. The relationship between evidence and policy is, however, not that self-evident as Carol Weiss pointed out already more than 30 years ago when she indicated that ‘the prevailing expectations for use of (...) knowledge and research are much higher than reported use [by policy-makers]’ (Weiss, 1978, p. 27). The gap between evidence and policy has become evident from a variety of studies conducted within policy domains such as education (Birkeland, Murphy-Graham, & Weiss, 2005; Weiss, Murphy-Graham, & Birkeland, 2005), health care (Green, Ottoson, García, & Hiatt, 2009; Ouimet, Landry, Amara, & Belkhdja, 2006), environmental policies (Hisschemöller, Hoppe, Groenewegen, & Midden, 2001; Turnhout, Hisschemöller, & Eijsackers, 2007) and immigration policies (Florence et al., 2005). Knowledge utilization – or the lack thereof – has also been discussed in a multitude of studies pertaining to different types of evidence for policy-making such as public performance reports (McDavid & Huse, 2012; Van Dooren & van de Walle, 2009), policy evaluations outcomes (Adamo, 2002; Grasso, 2003; Weiss et al., 2005), policy appraisals (Dunlop, 2010; Turnpenny et al., 2008), scientific policy analysis (Amara, Ouimet, & Landry, 2004; Juntti, Russel, & Turnpenny, 2009), policy-oriented foresight (European Commission, 2006; Fobé & Brans, 2013; Van der Duin, van Oirschot, Kotey, & Vreeling, 2008), and policy advice (Koontz, 2005; McGurk, Sinclair, & Diduck, 2006).

The factors affecting the influence of different sources of advice have been identified in various strands of the policy analytical literature. Several authors refer to the characteristics of the advisory sources themselves. Halligan’s locational model of advisory systems (Craft & Howlett, 2012), for example, takes into account the degree of government control over these sources of advice and their geographical or institutional location vis-à-vis the policy-maker (Halligan, 1995). Findings relating to the knowledge utilization literature point to the importance of timeliness of and broad societal support for the advice, or indicate that the legacy of the advisory source can impact its influence (see for example Adamo, 2002; Brans, Van Damme, & Gaskell, 2010; Green et al., 2009; Koontz, 2005; Rich, 1997). In addition, authors on interactive policies refer to elements pertaining to the way advice is produced, and argue that aspects such as transparency and facilitation of advice production, or the nature of advisory procedures can increase the influence of advice (see for example Beierle & Cayford, 2002; Beierle, 2000; Edelenbos, Klok, & Van Tatenhove,

2009; Papadopoulos & Warin, 2007; Rowe & Frewer, 2004; Sterne & Zagon, 1997; Van Damme & Brans, 2012; Webler & Tuler, 2000).

Before turning to our analysis of the characteristics of permanent advisory councils in Flanders and their (perceived) influence on policy-making, we introduce the particulars of this advisory practice and explain our research approach in more detail.

### 3. The Flemish advisory council tradition

The Belgian and Flemish political system is marked by pillarization but also shows important neo-corporatist traits (Van den Bulck, 1992). In the policy-making process in Flanders (and Belgium) socio-economic civil society organizations have gained a privileged policy-making position (Vancoppenolle & Brans, 2004). Not only socio-economic policies, but certainly also education as well as welfare and health are traditionally formulated with the input and support of strong societal actors or interest groups. Key stakeholders in these respective policy domains are trade unions and employers' organizations, education providers and education labour unions, and health insurance funds and medical doctors' associations (Brans & Maes, 2001; De Winter & Dumont, 2003; Van Den Brande, 1987).

Historically, all of these stakeholders possess strong, formal and institutionalized policy-making powers (Van Waarden & Lehbruch, 2004). They are present in all the possible configurations of advice and deliberation, which guarantee them formal access to the policy-making process (Vancoppenolle & Brans, 2004). Today, also in other policy domains such as agriculture, innovation and technology, mobility or culture do societal organizations or interest groups assume an important advisory role. They are often highly involved in the formulation as well as the implementation of policies in their policy domains.

The Belgian/Flemish policy advisory system is historically and typically organized through formally institutionalized and permanent advisory councils. In a recent study, the OECD stated that there are about 250 advisory bodies at the Belgian federal level and 46 councils at the regional level (OECD, 2010). A large number of other forums for participation and advice have been created in recent years, amounting to more than 600 councils and committees (De Standaard, 2011). Due to their continually growing number, the need for reform, transparency and simplification in the advisory council system has recently acquired a place on the government's policy agenda (OECD, 2010). At the regional level in Belgium some reforms have already been implemented in the advisory system. Among these is a rationalization of the permanent advisory bodies in Flanders. The basis for this reform was a 2000 report commissioned by the Flemish government which made reference to no less than 126 permanent advisory bodies providing advice directly to policy-makers (Stroobants & Victor, 2000). Responding to calls for political primacy and more transparency and to concerns over strengthening societal support for policy, the Flemish government reshaped its advisory council landscape by decree in 2003. The reform in itself was part of another, broader reorganization of the Flemish public administration, aimed at increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of public policies in Flanders. It was implemented in 2006 and today 12 strategic advisory councils are active in various policy domains, as presented in Fig. 1.

### 4. Research focus and approach

In this article, we analyze the reorganized advisory council system in Flanders and its capacity to influence policy-making. We look at nine strategic advisory councils and compare several of their characteristics pertaining to their

<i>Council</i>	<i>Policy domain</i>
Minaraad	Environment & Nature
MORA	Mobility
SARC	Culture, Sports, Youth & Media
SARiV	International relations
SARO	Spatial planning
Vlaamse Woonraad	Housing
VLABEST	Administrative Affairs
VLOR	Education
VRWI	Science, Technology & Innovation
SERV	General Policy, Employment, (Social-)Economy, Energy
SALV	Agriculture, Fishing
SAR WGG	Wellbeing, Public Health, Family

Fig. 1. The Flemish strategic advisory council system.

influence on the policy-making process. For this, we apply a threefold approach. First, we analyze a number of defining characteristics on the input side of the Flemish strategic advisory councils, such as their legal framework, tasks, age, membership characteristics and legacy. To assess these features, we carried out an extensive document analysis. Subsequently, we treat a set of input and process related elements: the time for and timeliness of the advice, the transparency and facilitation of the advisory process and the involvement of the councils' members in this process. Third, we assess to what extent the advice provided by the strategic advisory councils was used in the policy-making process. The second and third part of the analysis relies on the results of a survey assessing the perceptions of the advisory councils' members.

The results presented in this article draw on a documentary analysis and a survey. The former focused primarily on the assessment of various policy documents, relating to the decree reforming the advisory council system and the parliamentary discussions preceding it. Additionally, the document analysis included the advisory councils' internal documents treating of their constellation, general functioning and specific advisory procedures. The analysis of relevant (policy) documents proved insightful for assessing the advisory council system and the principles behind the reform. Additionally, it made possible a first exploration of the individual councils and their (internal) characteristics.

The survey, then, was conducted in 2009 and allowed us to obtain a clear and broad view within a relatively limited time period of various aspects of the advisory process, as well as the perception and satisfaction about that process of the councils' members. The survey was carried out with nine out of the twelve strategic advisory councils in Flanders, representing three quarters of the total number of strategic advisory councils in Flanders, and an equal share of members. The content of the survey was decided upon via a process of internal and external validation. Based on our document analysis, as well as on 13 elite interviews, a draft of the survey was made and sent to several actors within the policy advisory field. Their comments helped complete the survey which was then distributed to all 203 members of the participating nine councils.

The survey's response rate was 72.4% ( $N = 147$ ). The response rate of all councils surpasses 62% and even amounts to more than 80% in some cases. Due to this overall high response rate, we may state that the results of the survey are widely supported throughout the advisory system. However, the survey only relates to the perceptions and the satisfaction of members of the advisory councils. It did not include perceptions of political actors (ministers, members of parliament) as principals of these advisory councils, nor of the councils' administrative staff. It is likely that the perceptions of these actors differ to some extent from those of the councils' members, for example regarding the influence of the advice on the policy-making process.

## 5. Characteristics of the advisory council system

The 2003 reform reorganized the advisory council system in Flanders. In particular, existing policy advisory bodies were reinstalled as strategic policy advisory councils and new strategic advisory councils were created. The strategic advisory councils are permanent in that they have been established by decree in their respective policy domains. Via separate decrees these councils are also assigned specific advisory tasks within the Flemish policy-making process.

The formal role of the strategic advisory councils in the policy-making process comes after the policy formulation phase. More precisely, ministers are required to solicit advice with the council(s) in their policy domain after policy-decisions have been agreed upon in principle by the Flemish government coalition partners. The councils then advise governments on these policy proposals predominantly on the basis of consensus between their members. Policy-makers are free to diverge from the advice they have been required to solicit. Thus, the strategic advisory councils do not provide policy advice that is binding (Fig. 2).

Next to the ministers' mandatory solicitation of advice on policy-decisions, the strategic advisory councils are also entitled to provide advice on their own account. The councils can indeed take the initiative of advising government earlier in the policy cycle. In this case, the time for providing advice to the government is unlimited, whereas the advisory councils have only a maximum number of four weeks with regard to mandatory questions for advice.

For their activities, the advisory councils receive an annual working budget from the Flemish government. In 2011 this budget amounted to an average of 694,000 euros per council. There are, however, strong differences between the councils. Our analysis shows that the two largest councils annually receive more than 1 million euros each, while the three smallest councils have an annual working budget below 250,000 euros. The volume of the working budget is predominantly related to the councils' tasks which are for some councils much more elaborated, extending beyond advising the Flemish government. Some councils are indeed also involved in the implementation of policy



<i>Degree of institutionalisation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General establishment of strategic advisory system by decree</li> <li>• Establishment by decree of individual advisory councils</li> </ul>
<i>Formal advisory role</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mandatory advisory question by the minister after principle agreement</li> <li>• Advice to the Flemish government on the councils' own initiative</li> </ul>
<i>Time for advice production</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Four weeks in case of solicited advice (provided exceptions)</li> <li>• Unlimited in case of advice on its own initiative</li> </ul>
<i>Type of advice</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-binding advice</li> </ul>

Fig. 2. The strategic advisory councils' context.

programmes and the execution of research in their respective policy domains. The councils' staff size differs and is related to the budget received by government and, accordingly, to the different tasks allocated. Membership size differs as well between the councils. It is to a certain extent fixed by decree. Each decree details the number of members representing specified stakeholder groups, as well as the number of individual members having a scientific or lay background. Candidates have to apply for membership and are then instated by government. The council president is chosen from among the council's members or appointed by the government.

Fig. 3 compares the nine participating councils along the above mentioned characteristics. From the overview it is clear that reorganizing the advisory system has not led to uniformity, since significant differences between the councils exist. In the following paragraphs, we highlight two important elements pertaining to the influence of the advisory councils on policy-making. More precisely, we will discuss the councils' legacy as producers of advice and their reliance on evidence coming from different types of actors to produce the advice.

Firstly, it is important to note that the current advisory system in Flanders is relatively new (the reform took effect in 2006) and that most advisory councils have been active in their respective policy domains for only a short period of time. Three councils already existed before the advisory system reform and had been active for about 15 years. Notwithstanding a slightly altered membership, their staff and budget remained roughly the same, ensuring continuity in the councils' functioning and in the way advice was produced.

In light of this, we note that various authors emphasize that the legacy of advisory bodies is relevant to their influence on policy-making (Green et al., 2009; Rich, 1997). Adamo (2002) for example asserts that a solid reputation leads to increased visibility and access to, as well as more attention by policy-makers. Similarly, "access to resources such as funding and technical assistance" is critical "to be taken seriously in policymaking" (Koontz, 2005, p. 462). The three established advisory councils receive higher government grants and possess of a fully equipped and experienced staff which allows them easier access to the policy-making process. These councils can rely on a strong and long standing reputation of providing sound advice for governments, whereas the councils that were newly created still had (have) to establish and profile themselves as advisory bodies within their respective policy domains.

Secondly, as is expected in a system with neo-corporatist traits, lawmakers gave a high preference to the representation of stakeholders and interest groups in the advisory councils. The experience-based knowledge these actors provide has been awarded a higher importance in the advisory process in comparison to insights provided by individual stakeholders or through academic expertise. Only in the council on Administrative Affairs do academics as members play a leading role in advising government. The other advisory councils will draw either upon experts from within representatives' organizations or occasionally turn during the advisory process to an external pool of academic experts to provide them with relevant information. It also happens that councils use part of their budgets to commission research to university experts. The information provided serves as the scientific background based on which the discussion between stakeholders takes place. We note that the strong reliance on a broad consultation of stakeholders when producing consensus-based policy advice has its advantages. It can increase the utilization of policy advice in policy-making, as it is an indication to policy-makers that decisions based on this advice will (probably) not be confronted with resistance by societal groups (Adamo, 2002; Dunlop, 2010; McGurk et al., 2006; Papadopoulos & Warin, 2007).

<i>Council</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Budget*</i>	<i>Staff size</i>	<i>Members</i>	<i>Specific membership**</i>	<i>President</i>
Council for Environment & Nature	1995/2009	1.170	7	24	20R+4A/L	Chosen R
Mobility Council	2007	424	5	28	24R+3A+1L	Appointed L
Council for Culture, Sports, Youth & Media	2008	172	3	13	9R+4A/L	Chosen A/L
Council on International Relations	2008	340	3	20	10R+10A/L	Chosen A/L
Council on Spatial Planning	2008	303	1	20	15R+5A/L	Chosen A/L
Flemish Housing Council	2007	247	1	20	15R+5A/L	Chosen A/L
Council on Administrative Affairs	2007	188	1	14	4R+10A/L	Chosen A/L
Education Council	1990/2006	2.570	26	39	32R+7L	Appointed extra
Science, Technology & Innovation Council	1993/2010	840	6	25	13R+12A/L***	Chosen A/L

(\*) Budget for 2009 presented in EUR x1.000.

(\*\*) Number of members representing interest /stakeholder groups (R), advising independently as academics (A) or participating as lay/individual stakeholders (L).

(\*\*\*) The council includes among its 12 individual and scientific experts also the heads of five Flemish government administration agencies.

Fig. 3. Flemish advisory councils' organizational characteristics. (\*) Budget for 2009 presented in EUR 1000×. (\*\*) Number of members representing interest/stakeholder groups (R), advising independently as academics (A) or participating as lay/individual stakeholders (L). (\*\*\*) The council includes among its 12 individual and scientific experts also the heads of five Flemish government administration agencies.

We can conclude this first part of the analysis by arguing that the advisory council reform established a number of strategic policy advisory councils with varying possibilities to facilitate the use of their advice in policy-making. These possibilities relate to the degree to which they rely on broad stakeholder support and, even more so, to their legacy or reputation as valuable actors for advice in the policy-making process.

## 6. Perceptions of the production of policy advice

In this second part of the analysis, we discuss the perception of the advisory councils' members regarding the input and process side of the advice, thereby relying on the results of our survey. We look at elements facilitating the possible influence of policy advice linked with the internal advisory process, such as the timeliness of the advice and the time for advice production, the degree of facilitation of the advisory process, its transparency, and specific voting procedures.

Firstly, considering the timeliness of the advice and the time for advice production, we asked the members of the advisory councils to indicate (1) how often the advice question comes at the right time in the policy process, and (2) how often there is enough time for advice production. Both elements have been determined by government itself, and are equal to all advisory councils. Research shows that the time dimension of advice production and diffusion can

	<i>Question for advice comes at the right time in the policy-making process. (N=141)</i>	<i>There is enough time for the production of advice after the question has been received. (N=144)</i>
<i>Never</i>	4,26%	4,86%
<i>Almost never</i>	14,18%	40,97%
<i>Sometimes</i>	41,84%	34,03%
<i>Often</i>	21,28%	13,10%
<i>Almost always</i>	15,60%	5,56%
<i>Always</i>	2,04%	1,39%

Fig. 4. Member perception of the timeliness of and time for advice production.

advance the influence of advice on policy-making. Authors referring to the timeliness of the advice emphasize the need for a strong link with the policy-making process (Cohen, 1995; Edelenbos et al., 2009; Grasso, 2003; Green et al., 2009) and the “involvement [of evidence] at normative and strategic stages” in policy-making (McGurk et al., 2006). A lack of timeliness can inhibit the influence on policy-making and limit policy learning (Dunlop, 2010). Sufficient time (and resources) for advice production is regarded as another prerequisite for policy advice to be picked up by policy-makers, since it means that adequate and relevant information, data and knowledge could be obtained and processed (Banks, 2009; Dunlop, Magetti, Radaelli, & Russel, 2012). The relative distribution of the members’ perceptions on both items is presented in Fig. 4.

Almost 60% of members perceive the advice as not coming at the right time in the policy-making process. The distribution of answers is quite even. The survey does not indicate whether the question for advice comes too early or rather too late in the policy process. From the interviews, however, we know that members find the advice as coming too late in the policy process, namely after decisions have been agreed upon in principle by the Flemish government coalition partners.

The policy advisory councils apply different strategies to counteract the relatively late moment at which they are asked to formulate policy advice. They can, for example, proactively consult with the minister or his/her personal advisors during the policy-making process. The advisory councils hereby try to have the minister ask for advice prior to the required moment in the policy process. Anticipating possible questions for advice by the minister requires of course the necessary capacity within each council’s secretariat in order to follow up certain dossiers. This is not evident for some of the (newer) councils with a limited staff.

Consultation with the minister also allows the councils to gather more information in advance, i.e. before receiving a question for advice. This provides the policy advisory councils with more time for discussion during the official advisory period. As the results of the survey show, almost 80% of the members indicate that they seldom have sufficient time for the formulation of policy advice. Only 7% perceives there to be enough time for the production of advice. There are statistically significant differences between the councils.<sup>1</sup> Members of the Innovation Council perceive the time for advice production significantly more often to be enough, while members of the Housing and Spatial Planning Council indicate to greater extent that this is not the case. A better understanding and explanation of these differences between the councils could not be derived from our survey and would require a more in-depth analysis via interviews with these councils’ members and staff.

Again, the councils try to counteract this possible limitation to the influence of their advice on the policy-making process in various ways. The advisory councils do not only look for closer consultation with the minister to prevent the

<sup>1</sup> Non-parametric test ( $p = 0.0001$ ).



	<i>I feel strongly involved during the advisory process (N=144)</i>	<i>I am satisfied about the extent to which my input is being considered during the advisory process (N=144)</i>
<i>Absolutely not</i>	0,69%	1,39%
<i>No</i>	2,03%	5,56%
<i>Not really, no</i>	9,03%	8,33%
<i>Neither positive nor negative</i>	13,89%	12,50%
<i>A bit, yes</i>	36,81%	47,92%
<i>Yes</i>	29,86%	19,44%
<i>Absolutely</i>	7,64%	4,86%

Fig. 5. Perceptions regarding the input of members during the advisory process.

time for advice production to become a problem, they also take up policy advice production on their own initiative. In this way, the councils possess of unlimited time for advice production. The advice can even be formulated before decisions have been principally decided upon between government coalition members. It implies that the councils proactively place a topic on the policy agenda, or provide advice during the early stages of the policy formulation phase. The policy advisory councils' strategies to increase the time for advice production are therefore closely linked with ensuring the timeliness of the advice.

In the following paragraphs, we continue our analysis by focussing on the organization of the internal advisory process. We discuss the participation by the councils' members, the degree of facilitation of the advisory process, its transparency, and specific voting procedures. It needs to be noted that the councils are able to decide upon the application of these elements themselves and thus have the possibility to improve their own performance if necessary.

First, we treat the extent to which the members of the councils feel strongly involved during the advisory process and are satisfied about the consideration during this process of their own input. Overall, both factors can be seen as positive aspects of the advisory process, given that more than 70% of the members indicate to feel both strongly involvement and satisfied about the consideration of their input during the advisory process. Even though the figure provides a positive view on this subject, we emphasize the importance of addressing possible problems beforehand. Members who do not feel involved in the production of policy advice in their council, may no longer actively participate during the advisory process, or even terminate their participation in the council in general. This may reduce the overall input from actors in the advisory process, and therefore the councils' capacity to analyze the topic under consideration and produce robust and broadly supported advice (Beierle, 2002; McGurk et al., 2006; Papadopoulos & Warin, 2007) (Fig. 5).

Additionally, a lack of involvement in or satisfaction with the advisory process can possibly reduce the sense of ownership and collective understanding of the topic of advice, which in turn can undermine the influence of the advice that is finally produced (McGurk et al., 2006; Milner, Bailey, Deans, & Pettigrew, 2005). Creating a sense of ownership can be achieved through various means relating to the internal advisory process. In our survey, we questioned to what extent the overall advisory process was perceived by the members as transparent. The production of policy advice during the aforementioned four weeks goes through several phases which are more or less fixed and applied in each dossier. Additionally, we assessed to what extent the members agree on voting procedures for advice production in the council. As mentioned already, most advisory councils provide advice based on a consensus between their members. The Environment and Nature Council and the Education Council include the possibility of adding minority standpoints in their final advice, although reaching consensus is always considered a priority. It needs to be noted, that we did not ask the members which type of decision making system they preferred. The question rather focused on the extent to which they agreed with the decision-making process in their own council (Fig. 6).

	<i>I have a clear view on the advisory process in my council (N=142)</i>	<i>I agree with the way my council decides upon the advice (N=144)</i>
<i>Absolutely not</i>	0%	0%
<i>No</i>	2,11%	1,39%
<i>Not really, no</i>	5,63%	4,17%
<i>Neither positive nor negative</i>	12,68%	9,72%
<i>A bit, yes</i>	33,10%	34,03%
<i>Yes</i>	34,51%	36,81%
<i>Absolutely</i>	11,97%	13,89%

Fig. 6. Transparency and voting procedures.

Contrary to what [McGurk et al. \(2006\)](#) found in their research on stakeholder advisory committees in Canada, neither the transparency nor the agreement with voting procedures can be considered a weakness in the functioning of the Flemish strategic advisory councils. The figure presents the relative distribution of answers for the two items. As was the case with the other elements of the advisory process a large majority, about 80%, of the councils' members positively appreciates the transparency and decision-mode within their own council.

A last factor we discuss in this part of the article, relates to the role of the councils' staff and president as facilitators of advice production. The council secretariat provides the relevant information to members on the topic of discussion and writes up the final advice. In getting to this, the secretariat and the council president are responsible for facilitating the discussions between the members. They are also assumed to mediate during these discussions and strive for a consensus on the advice. Additionally, the councils' secretariat is responsible for communicating with the minister, the relevant governmental departments or agencies, and the Flemish parliament, as well as with stakeholders within the policy domain and the public in general. The council president is equally involved in representing the council vis-à-vis this variety of actors.

We present four items as part of a scale labelled 'facilitation of policy advice' in the figure below. The possible scores range from 1 to 7, where 1 indicates that the members do not at all agree with the item, and 7 indicates that they absolutely agree. The scale's average score is very high, reaching 5.74. The result shows that the councils' members have a very positive perception of the way advice is facilitated by both the secretariat and the president of each council. This is important in light of the influence of the advice on policy-making. Various authors assert that policy advice can impact policies if it is being championed or connected to policy-makers and the policy-making process by one or more actors (see for example [Edelenbos et al., 2009](#); [Landry, Lamari, & Amara, 2003](#); [Lynn, 1987](#)). The results indicate that the councils' secretariat and president are taking up their role in facilitating the advisory council system quite well ([Fig. 7](#)).

We conclude this second part of our analysis by emphasizing that the factors pertaining to the production of advice within the councils are predominantly (very) positively appreciated by their members. We would argue that this is relevant in light of the support for the advice, as well as to the functioning of the advisory councils. In general, it increases the possibilities for uptake of the advisory councils' advice in the policy-making process.

There is, however, also some margin for improvement on this subject – albeit limited – given that about 10% of members do not have a clear view on or indicate to feel little involved during the advisory process. These aspects of internal organization of the advisory process can however be (easily) addressed by the strategic advisory councils themselves.

## 7. Perceptions of the influence of policy advice

The analysis above showed that the strategic advisory councils start off with different capacities to advise governments. Notwithstanding certain limitations related to the input side of the advisory council system, the strategic

Scale	Average score (from 1-7)
Facilitation of policy advice	5,74
<i>Items*</i>	
The discussions in the council were structured well by the president of the council	
The council president added to the production of the advice	
The council staff provided adequate relevant information for the members to generate the advice	
The council staff added to the proceeding of the advisory process	
(*) Cronbach's alpha raw score=0.74	

Fig. 7. Facilitation of policy advice.

advisory councils' members perceive the councils to function considerably well. A number of important characteristics of the process side of the advisory context is positively perceived by the councils' members – even though there are some significant differences between the councils. These findings already provide us some indication of the possibility for uptake of the councils' advice by policy-makers. In this final part, we present the perception of the policy advisory councils' members on the influence of the policy advice. We recognize that perceptions on the influence of the advice by the members of the advisory council system do not equal the actual uptake of this advice in policy-making, nor the perceptions of policy-makers regarding this topic. The findings presented in this section are nonetheless interesting in light of the results in the two former parts of our analysis.

Influence can be conceived in various ways (for a theoretical discussion, see for example Bekkers, Fenger, Homburg, & Putters, 2004; Greene, 1988; Weiss, 1991). We discern instrumental, agenda-setting and strategic or symbolic influence. Instrumental influence refers to advice being directly used by policy-makers in the policy process. It was assessed in the survey via two items,<sup>2</sup> i.e. how often the advice leads to a change in the implementation of policies, and how often it changes policy-decisions. We consider an agenda-setting influence<sup>3</sup> of advice taking place when it leads to a political discussion, attention by the media, as well as a debate within society in general. The advice can also be (mis)used to legitimize the government's own policies or, from the viewpoint of the political opposition, argue for a change in policies.

The members of the advisory councils perceive the advice which they produce only very occasionally to have an influence *in any way* on policy and policy-makers. The average scores on the aforementioned items are low, i.e. 2.85 for instrumental influence, 2.34 for an agenda-setting influence, and 3.19 with regard to a strategic influence (with scores ranging from 1 to 6, where 1 indicates that the advice never influences policy and 6 indicates that this is always the case). The members of the strategic advisory councils thus seem to be quite sceptical about the different ways the advisory councils are able to influence the policy-making process (Fig. 8).

Additionally, there are statistically significant differences<sup>4</sup> between the various councils, although relatively speaking, the scores all remain quite low. A bit surprising perhaps are the low scores which the members of the Council on Administrative Affairs attributed to the various types of influence. Maybe these members, which predominantly have a scientific background, are even more critical of the uptake of their advice by the government compared to their societal or interest group counterparts in other councils. However, the reason behind these different perceptions needs to be further assessed.

It also needs to be noticed that compared to all the other questions in the survey, the elements pertaining to influence generated the lowest average response rates among respondents. About 20% of respondents indicated that they did not know how often the advice influences policy. The degree to which the councils' members responded to these items or indicated not being able to answer the question, also differs strongly. In itself, this low response rate points to an

<sup>2</sup> Cronbach's alpha raw score = 0.82.

<sup>3</sup> Cronbach's alpha raw score = 0.81.

<sup>4</sup> Non-parametric test with  $p < 0.0001$  (instrumental influence);  $p = 0.0008$  (agenda-setting influence);  $p = 0.0006$  (strategic influence).

<i>Council</i>	<i>Instrumental Influence</i>		<i>Agenda-setting Influence</i>		<i>Strategic Influence*</i>	
	<i>N(%)</i>	<i>Score (1-6)</i>	<i>N (%)</i>	<i>Score (1-6)</i>	<i>N(%)</i>	<i>Score (1-6)</i>
<i>Council for Environment &amp; Nature</i>	85	2,79	95	2,67	80	3,06
<i>Mobility Council</i>	67	2,88	89	2,52	72	3,15
<i>Council for Culture, Sports, Youth &amp; Media</i>	100	2,95	82	1,70	82	3
<i>Council on International Relations</i>	40	2,33	47	2,14	53	3,13
<i>Council on Spatial Planning</i>	85	2,14	85	2,21	77	3
<i>Flemish Housing Council</i>	87	2,35	67	1,90	40	3,5
<i>Council on Administrative Affairs</i>	90	1,94	80	1,83	90	2,11
<i>Education Council</i>	87	3,26	87	2,42	87	3,19
<i>Science, Technology &amp; Innovation Council</i>	100	3,82	93	2,79	93	4,38

(\*) Cronbach's alpha raw score for the above two elements was quite low, i.e. 0.52; in the figure we only present the scores for legitimizing policy

Fig. 8. Influence of the policy advice.

important deficit in the advisory process, i.e. the lack of feedback to the members of the advisory councils on whether or not their advice is being used by policy-makers.

## 8. Conclusion

In this article, we looked at the Flemish advisory councils as a means established to create better policies and generate broader societal support. Several characteristics pertaining to the input and process side of this advisory system were assessed. These elements have been identified by various authors as impacting on the uptake of the advice by policy-makers. The latter can be considered an implicit but nonetheless crucial condition for advisory councils in particular, and policy advisory systems in general to substantively contribute to the policy-making process and to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of policies.

The article was based largely on a survey conducted in 2009 with the members of the advisory councils, following a reform that was implemented in 2006. This reform did not lead to uniformity in the advisory council system. The differences between advisory councils can in part be traced back to the historical development of the advisory system in Flanders where the consultation of stakeholders in certain domains has traditionally been regarded as more important than in other domains. Consequently, the longstanding and firm reputation of advisory councils that existed prior to the reform of the advisory council system contrasts with those councils that are newly established and have to rely on a more limited budget and staff to produce advice.

These varying organizational characteristics of the councils already seem to imply different possibilities to influence the policy-making process. Additionally, our analysis showed that the time for advice production and the timeliness of the advice potentially reduce the impact of the advisory councils on policy-making. And while these aspects are decided upon by government itself, several councils apply strategies to avoid them from becoming too

restrictive to their functioning. However, the strategies used seem to depend on the availability of budget and staff in the council, which again implies that differences between the councils to influence policy-making persist.

Despite these differences between the policy advisory councils, the analysis also showed that all members have a generally positive perception of the advisory process. They feel that they are strongly involved and perceive the advisory process to be transparent and receptive to their own input, highly facilitated by the council president and staff. But while these positive perceptions on the advisory process can advance the influence of the advice on policy-making, the members of the councils are themselves quite sceptical about this. Here, we need to highlight that the councils' members are not the right individuals to question about the use of advice, and we make note of the fact that based on these results we can say little about the goal of actually creating better policies. For this, more research is required, as well as the inclusion of political actors in the analysis.

A first conclusion we can draw from these results is that although the reform of the strategic policy advisory system in Flanders seems a continuation of a neo-corporatist policy-making tradition in Flanders, it also poses a certain threat to this system. On the one hand, the implementation of predominantly stakeholder-based advisory councils, reaffirms the importance of established stakeholders and social interests in policy-making in Flanders. On the other hand, however, the influence of advice on policy seems minimum and the timing of advice is perceived to be too late and too short. There is indeed a trade-off between the consultation of stakeholders, and concerns over restoring political primacy in policy-making in general and policy-formulation in particular. The emphasis on the latter as a basis for the advisory system reform, entails that the strategic advisory councils are consulted after decisions have been principally agreed on by government coalition members, and that they provide non-binding advice.

Second, we could assert that aspects of the advisory process itself seem to be less relevant to the (perceived) influence of the advice than elements pertaining to the context for advising the government. Again, we stress the need for further research as there does not seem to be a broad consensus on this in the literature, and different types of influence may require different conditions to take place. In light of these results, we are also challenged to reflect on what elements members' satisfaction is actually based on then. The new strategic advisory system indeed generates satisfaction that is not based on its influence. Additional research on the effects of advisory systems could therefore move away from an instrumental perspective, and help us learn more about social learning and other such process-related results.

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